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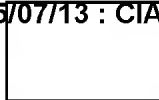
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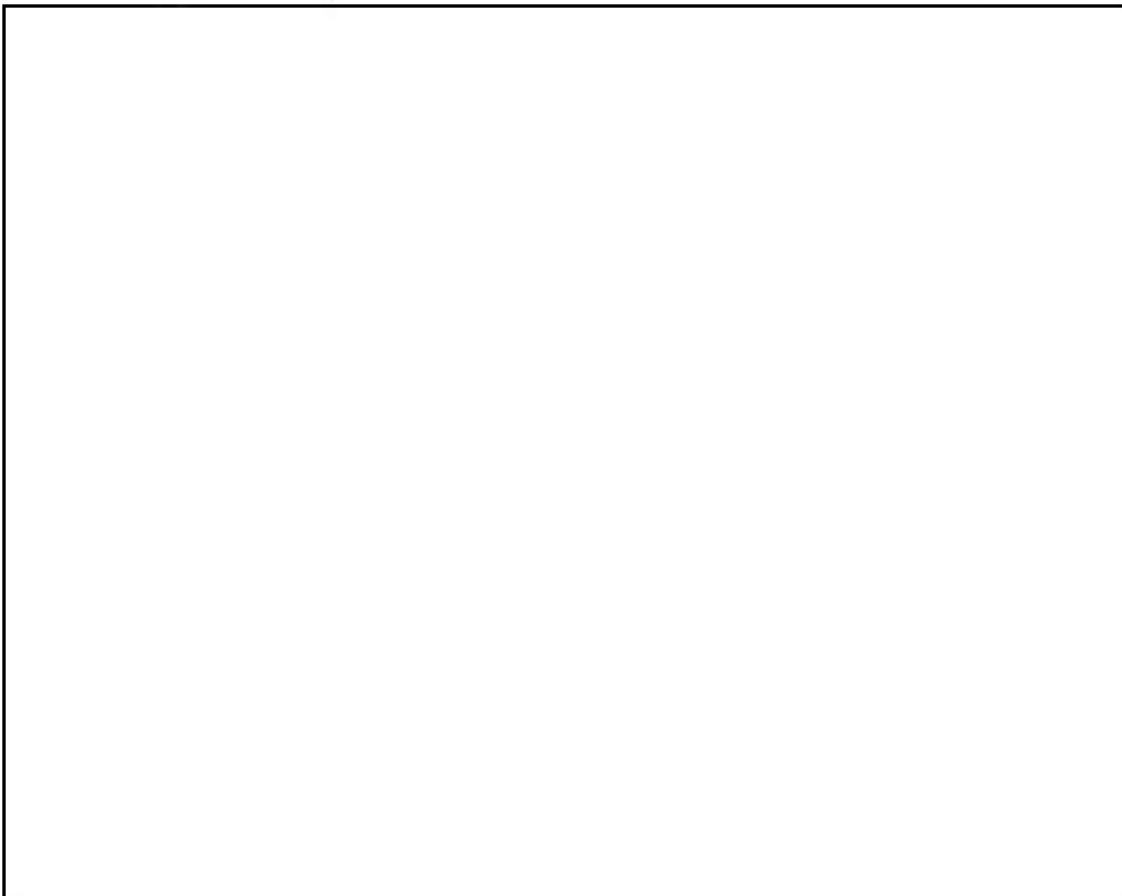
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The French Communists Dig In

The Central Committee of the French Communist Party met on 19-20 June to grapple with the problems of new tactics for the immediate future. The leadership faced two related challenges: the intraparty protest against the erratic and arbitrary tactics used in the past two years and the larger problem of what stance to assume toward the Socialists.

For the party leaders, the internal protest is part of their problem with the Socialists, who benefit when the Communists break ranks. By bullying members who have written in the nonparty press and by arousing party patriotism against those who "comfort the big bourgeoisie by abusing the party," the leadership has forced most dissidents to fall silent. Some criticism will be allowed late in the year when Communist federation congresses will meet to prepare the 23rd national congress, which falls due in February 1979. But by that time the leadership will presumably have some cosmetic changes in party statutes prepared that are designed to blunt criticism while changing nothing.

The Central Committee heard a report claiming that only 90 to 100 cells out of 27,000 expressed disagreement with the Central Committee's position that the party bears no responsibility for the March electoral defeat. Identifiable protesters are, in fact, not numerous, though they may have expressed a widespread malaise in the party after what seemed an unnecessary defeat. Recruitment statistics for 1978 will show whether rank-and-file Communists are truly upset and are voting against the leadership with their feet. The new recruitment goal has been set for 700,000--a 10 percent hike.

The French Communists have never been strong because they were flexible or offered internal democracy; the Communists draw strength from institutionalized protest against French society as presently organized, along with

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a lack of confidence in the Socialist Party as a viable alternative. As long as these feelings persist--and can be cultivated--there is little likelihood that Communist strength will shrink. The Communist leaders are now engaged in intensifying distrust of the Socialists in order to strengthen their party's morale, which is one reason why they insist on placing the entire blame of the lost victory on the Socialists.

At the same time, the Socialists remain bitter toward the Communists for their role in the defeat of the left. Given this mutual repulsion, neither party has an interest in a rapid resumption of their entente. The Communists are interested spectators of the factional struggles reemerging in the Socialist Party, which are in part a first attempt to explore the issue of the succession to first secretary Francois Mitterrand. They undoubtedly are looking for ways to encourage the struggle in order to woo members of the Socialist leftwing CERES group, weaken the moderate forces around ambitious national secretary Michel Rocard, and generally diminish the coherence and unity of the Socialists.

In the meantime, the best formula for unity the Communists have found is the uninspiring slogan of "Union of the French People," which at this point means unity around the Communist Party. The party has no new policy of its own, but remains on watch for opportunities presented by its adversaries. If the Socialists quarrel, the Communists hope to benefit. And if the economic tensions of a continued recession amid austerity generate protest, the Communists will hope to lead the protest and profit from it.

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